

The meanings of mutiny: *Tacitus Annals* 1

Christopher Whitton

In A.D. 14 Rome's first emperor Augustus died. The power of the 'princirate', rule by a single man, passed to his adopted son Tiberius. This turbulent year was full of incident and intrigue, but the Roman historian Tacitus singles out in his *Annals* one theme above all, the short-lived mutinies of distant Roman legions. Christopher Whitton explains why.

Some time around the year A.D. 110, the former consul Tacitus set about writing his last and greatest work, the *Annals*. Its eighteen books charted the history of Julio-Claudian Rome year by year, from Augustus' death in A.D. 14 to Nero's in 68. At least, that is probably how it looked: nearly half of it, including the ending, has been lost, so that we can't be certain there were eighteen books, or quite where they finished. We can be sure, though, how it began, since the first six books, covering the reign of Tiberius, survive almost complete – and constitute one of the darkest, most gripping portraits of a ruler and his reign ever written.

Telling the story so far

Book 1 starts with a savagely concise 'story so far': a single paragraph whisks us from the first kings of Rome, through five hundred years of republic, to Augustus' victory in the civil wars and (so) back to one-man-rule. Most of the book's narrative, though, is devoted to just sixteen months, from the death of Augustus in August 14 to the end of 15. We peek behind the palace curtain at the machinations that led to Tiberius' accession; we get a first lesson in the hypocrisy of public life, as the senate rushes to 'enslave' itself to its new master and 'begs' him to take up – supposedly with reluctance – the reins of power. We see Germanicus, Tiberius' adopted son and heir apparent, campaigning on the northern fringes of empire; the treason-trials that would become so defining a feature of the principate get underway; and the book ends with another dose of imperial hypocrisy, as Tiberius notionally allows the senate to elect the next year's consuls – while making very clear whom they should choose.

All of this gives a clear taste of Tacitus'

priorities, as he pushes us to look deep beneath the glittering surface of Rome under the principate. But what about the mutinies? As readers of *Annals* 1 soon discover, it quickly settles into a long narrative of insurrection by legions in Pannonia and Germania, on the northeastern fringes of the Empire; this runs on, uninterrupted, for more than a third of the book (chapters 16–49). Conflict on the borders of the empire is normal fare in Roman history, but this one is unusual. No enemies are involved, no territory is lost or won, and the mutineers fail in their demands. It's a striking effect: almost before the *Annals* have got started, we find ourselves sloshing around in the mud for page after page – with not a battle in sight. Why?

Mutinies matter

The crudest answer is simply that the mutinies happened, and they were big. The *Annals* presents itself as a chronicle, reporting the major events at home and abroad year by year, and we need hardly doubt that these mutinies, involving a total of eleven legions – nearly half of Rome's worldwide army – were the biggest 'foreign' event of late 14. Still, the death of Augustus and the accession of Tiberius were pretty significant too, but Tacitus – and ultimately he alone decides how to weight different topics – gives them far less coverage. Why spend, relatively, so little time on these epoch-making events in the capital, and so much on the borders of Empire?

Personnel is one reason. The common soldiers (and Tacitus is no lover of the lower orders) and their more or less hapless commanders make for a varied bunch, but two senior figures clearly matter a lot. Tiberius' son Drusus is sent to quell the mutiny in Pannonia; his adoptive son Germanicus turns up at just the

right moment to handle the one in Germania. They were only in their late twenties, but their position as heirs apparent made them two of the most important individuals in Rome (think William and Harry). Neither turned out to be an actual heir: Germanicus died long before Tiberius, in A.D. 19, Drusus in 23. But Germanicus in particular is a talismanic figure in the early books of the *Annals*, a dashing prince to offset the grimness of old Tiberius in Rome – and to prompt his jealousy. He also proved to be a lynchpin of the Julio-Claudian dynasty as it unfolded: Caligula was his son, Claudius his brother, Nero his grandson. Little wonder, then, that Tacitus gives him and Drusus so much screentime as they try – with distinctly mixed results – to quell the mutinies.

A third consideration is that the army was a much more immediate part of life for many Romans than it is for many of us – at least in more settled parts of the world – now. A male citizen at the bottom of the social hierarchy had a good chance of spending most of his adult life as a legionary. Men in the senatorial class were routinely sent out as junior officers ('military tribunes') in their late teens or early twenties, and many would command one or more legions later in their career. Tacitus is a case in point: he was probably a military tribune in Britannia when he was around twenty and may have been a legionary commander in his thirties. Whereas scholars nowadays can easily be mocked as 'armchair generals', Tacitus and many of his elite readers were actual generals: little wonder that army life looms so large in Latin literature.

High drama

More than that, battles and campaigns gave ancient writers rich opportunity for high drama. In a famous digression (*Annals* 4.32–3) Tacitus suggests that what people really want to read about is great wars, cities sacked, foreign kings routed – and regrets that he has so little material to oblige them. That complaint doubles, amongst other things, as criticism of Tiberius' relatively cautious approach to imperial expansion. But there

must be some truth to his claim about audience tastes, and a revolt makes a good second best in any attempt to satisfy them. Modern readers too (and A-level examiners) find plenty to get excited about in the mutinies of book 1: vivid narrative of insubordination and executions; dramatic speeches and gestures; soldiers massacred. Roman history sets out, among other things, to entertain, and Tacitus turns these two mutinies into his most sustained performance of gripping, graphic description.

But that can't be the whole story: Tacitus surely aimed to be much more than an entertainer. A century and a half earlier, Livy, one of Tacitus' great predecessors as a historian, had given a pithy definition of history in his preface: its great function is to show what examples we should imitate, and what actions and consequences we should avoid as being 'disgraceful' (*foedum*). History, that is to say, is didactic (it teaches) and moralizing (it judges). Tacitus is notorious for making his lessons hard to understand, continually loading the burden of interpretation onto us, his readers. But there's no doubt that he's out to teach us: about human behaviour, about the psychology of rulers and the ruled, above all about Rome under monarchy. So what should we learn from the mutinies?

Almost spilling the secret

Ultimately the mutinies led to nothing. But they could have led to a great deal – as Tacitus' generation knew extremely well. Half a century later Nero committed suicide after a series of legions around the empire rebelled. That triggered a bloody scramble now known as the 'Year of the Four Emperors' (A.D. 68–9), as Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian claimed the throne one after the other. Tacitus lived through it as a boy, and made it the starting-point for his first major historical work, the *Histories* (only later did he go back, in the *Annals*, to the Julio-Claudian emperors). With Nero's death, he writes, 'a secret of imperial power was out: the emperor could be created elsewhere than at Rome' (*Histories* 1.4). Strictly speaking, it was the senate that proclaimed Galba emperor in June 68, but this, Tacitus characteristically suggests, was only a formality: the real power-brokers were Galba's troops. And that was only the beginning: Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian all depended, not on the senate, but on provincial legions or the Praetorian Guard at Rome for their claims on power. Even if the mutinies of 14 ended up being harmless, then, Tacitus and his readers were well placed to see just how dangerous they could have been – and to see, here at the start of Tiberius' principate, a prequel to the events of half a century later.

Tacitus invites us to think about just

that. He begins his narrative of the Pannonian mutiny with the words, *Hic rerum urbanarum status erat, cum...* ('This was the state of city affairs, when...', *Annals* 1.16). Early in the *Histories* he had used a very similar phrase: *Hic fuit rerum Romanarum status, cum...* ('This was the state of Roman affairs, when...', *Histories* 1.11). The echo looks banal and – like most ancient intertextuality (discreet cross-references to other works of literature) – is easy to miss. But it's also a very powerful one, and not just because these little phrases are so similarly placed, each a little way into the first book. Those words in the *Histories* are followed by news that legions in Germania had revolted against Galba, triggering the whole bloody sequence of coups and battles that fills *Histories* 1–3. Their echo, then, is a typically subtle pointer to the fact that Tacitus' two great historical works begin with an important similarity, and to a question: how like, and how unlike, were the revolts of 14 and 68? Even if the consequences in 14 were slight, what could have been? It is a striking lesson in imaginative history, and a clear signal about where power really lay in the principate. In theory, the senate was sovereign when it came to appointing emperors. In reality, it was anything but.

Competing with Livy

Let me end with another implicit comparison, one which sheds light on *Annals* 1 from a different angle. Tacitus famously models himself in many ways after Sallust, the cynical historian of disenchantment who wrote just after Julius Caesar's death. But there was also Livy, whose massive *Ab Urbe Condita* ('From the Foundation of Rome') had made him the other most celebrated Roman historian. Most of his 142 books have since been lost, but we know from summaries that the last ones featured the heroic deeds of Augustus' two stepsons, Tiberius and his brother Drusus, pursuing wars of conquest along the northeastern borders of empire. That Drusus is 'Drusus the Elder', not to be confused with Tiberius' son, 'Drusus the Younger', who features in *Annals* 1. But this is surely more than a coincidence: Livy ended his great history with two princes and heirs apparent, campaigning in Pannonia and Germania in 13–9 B.C. Tacitus begins his narrative twenty-five years later, as a new generation of heirs apparent campaign in Pannonia and Germania – but with a crucial difference. Tiberius and the Elder Drusus had conquered. Germanicus and the Younger Drusus do nothing more splendid than crisis-manage a mutiny each – and they don't even do that gloriously.

If Livy's last books survived, we would be able to test how precisely Tacitus exploits the parallel. But even this much

is suggestive. Livy had ended his history with military glory, Rome at the height of Augustan expansionism. Tacitus begins his *Annals* with a murky mirror image, a pair of mutinies that do nothing for Rome and its empire. Through the situational echo he invites us to compare (and contrast) his history with Livy's monumental work – and offers a devastating comment on Tiberius as the supreme commander under whom the empire doesn't expand: it turns on itself.

The *Annals* is nothing if not multilayered. If the mutinies look at first glance like a parade of Boys' Own adventure stories, they have a lot more to tell (and I have doubtless told only a small part of the story). Tacitus asks his readers to think hard: what sort of world did Tiberius preside over, where did power really lie in the empire – and what would happen the next time an emperor died?

Chris Whitton teaches Latin literature at Emmanuel College Cambridge.